



SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA 95064

E2 Building

November 3, 2015

Re: Sikhs and Sikhism in the State of California History-Social Science Framework

Instructional Quality Commission
California Department of Education
1430 N Street, Room 3207
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear IQC Members:

We learned recently from Professor Emerita Karen Leonard that she had emailed individual members of the IQC, suggesting that pioneer California settlers from India be referred to as Punjabis, not as Sikhs. While we respect Dr. Leonard's accomplishments, her perspective on this issue is incomplete. We would like to present an alternative perspective, based on our collective scholarship, which leads to a different conclusion than Prof. Leonard's.

First, as Prof. Leonard herself acknowledges, Sikhs were by far the dominant group among the pioneer settlers. On p. 30 of her 1992 book, *Making Ethnic Choices*, she writes (relying on previous scholarship by people such as Prof. Bruce La Brack – see her footnote 49 on this page), “Perhaps **85 to 90 percent of them were Sikhs**, and another 10 percent were Muslims, both members of monotheistic religions committed to the equality of all believers. Real Hindus, representatives of India's dominant religions with its many gods and caste system, were very few.”

Second, Prof. Leonard misrepresents the history of the Sikhs as a faith community. Relying solely on the highly problematic work of Harjot Oberoi, she states on p. 25 of her book, “In particular, he has shown that Sikh-Hindu boundaries were fluid and that a separate Sikh community began to be constructed only in the nineteenth century.” Unfortunately, this claim is historically just plain wrong, and has been refuted by many, including the foremost scholar of Sikh history, Jagtar Singh Grewal, in several definitive works (e.g., *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, Cambridge University Press, 1990; *Historical Perspectives on Sikh Identity*, Punjabi University Publication Bureau, 1997). Prof. Grewal provides a careful counterpoint to Oberoi's specific arguments, and makes clear that, in the main, **Sikhs viewed themselves as a distinct faith community from at least the seventeenth century**, during their founding period. Prof. Leonard does not appear to be cognizant of, or to have absorbed, Prof. Grewal's historical analysis. Indeed, in her most recent work that refers to Sikh and Punjabi migrants to California (Transnationalism, Diaspora, Translation, *Sikh Formations*, 2007), she continues to

claim, “The first Punjabi diaspora reflected the Punjab’s late-nineteenth-century plural society, where occupation and language were more important than religion [(p. 54).” And again, “The Punjabi pioneers, most among them Sikhs, were cosmopolitans [p. 55].” This reading of history and interpretation is seriously inaccurate, in our view, and does not reference the most well-regarded scholarship on Sikhs in the Punjab in the late nineteenth century, instead relying on a stray quote, by a scholar of Islam in the Punjab, of a colonial British source.

Third, Prof. Leonard seeks to position a distinct and visible Sikh identity as an unfortunate product of recent religious revivalism and narrowing of identity perceptions. This is present in her work from 1992 to 2007 and underpins her current perspective as well. In her 2007 article (pp. 55-56), for example, she states, “Arguably, the religious pluralism still lingering at the time of the early Punjabi immigrations abroad has given way to a narrow transnationalism in the late twentieth century, an emphasis on the Sikh religion at home and in the diaspora for the sake of identity.” We support pluralism and cosmopolitanism in our society, but these terms are compatible with religious faith and identity in ways that Prof. Leonard is unwilling to acknowledge for the Sikh community and Sikh faith. Indeed, she appears to ignore the pressures faced by early Sikh immigrants in the possibilities for preserving their religious identities. What Prof. Leonard projects as free agency can instead be viewed as a constrained response to a particular situation of unequal power relations faced by pioneer Sikh immigrants.

Indeed, Prof. Leonard’s own fieldwork supports this alternative view. As is well-documented, all the early Sikh migrants (with a handful of exceptions) were men. In the community Prof. Leonard studied in her 1992 work, these men had married women who were of Mexican origin, who practiced Catholicism. Prof. Leonard writes (p. 128), “In outward appearance, the Sikhs initially had been marked by the beard, long hair, and turban required by orthodox Sikhism. Retention of these characteristics proved difficult in the face of American (*sic*) prejudice. Moreover, many wives preferred their men to be clean-shaven. Several women explicitly linked the giving up of the turban and beard to their wedding day.” For the second generation (p. 126), “Children were socialized into the religion of their mothers.” Here Prof. Leonard recognizes that this socialization and “lack of a common language between fathers and children” hindered the transmission of understanding the fathers’ religious faiths to the children, something which she then subsumes under her ideal of being “cosmopolitans.” Her desire to adhere to the thesis that Sikh religious identity was a later (and implicitly undesirable) addition to the self-perceptions of Sikh pioneer immigrants leads her to discount her own examples, such as the Sikh who “changed his name from Singh to Ram because, having taken off the turban and beard, he felt he was no longer a Sikh and did not want to dishonor the Sikh religion...” (p. 127).

The upshot of Prof. Leonard’s views is a more homogenizing, assimilationist perspective of American society, one in which religious heritage and practice does not have a place in conceptions of pluralism or cosmopolitanism. This is an outdated scholarly perspective, and one which does disservice to more contemporary attempts to acknowledge histories of struggle and discrimination among minorities, and to give California’s current population a full understanding and appreciation of the different cultures that have contributed to the state’s diversity and pluralism. The external and visible identity of observant Sikhs, and their struggles to preserve this link to their core heritage, do not have a place in Prof. Leonard’s

work, and her suggestion of the use of the term “Punjabi” (which she gravitates toward and maintains in her own work) misses these struggles, their meaning, and the consequences for Sikh children in California today.

Since inculcating an appreciation of the significant dimensions of California’s diversity presumably underlies the aspects of the IQC’s work that are of relevance in the current discussions, it is useful to illustrate why being “Sikh” is not well-subsumed under “Punjabi,” as much now as in the past. Margaret Gibson, Professor Emerita at UC Santa Cruz, provided a nuanced and sympathetic study of Sikh high school students in the Sacramento Valley (*Accommodation without Assimilation*, Cornell University Press, 1988). Although this work was carried out some decades ago (1980-83), the phenomena it highlights are still present, and particularly relevant for nomenclature in the context of curriculum design. In the following quotes, Prof. Gibson disguises the fieldwork site as “Valleyside” and uses “Valleysiders” to refer to the non-Hispanic white majority in that locality. She uses the term “Punjabi,” to accommodate Hindus and Muslims in some cases, but also in cases where she is referring only to Sikhs. Her work is squarely about the *Sikh* community in Valleyside. The following quotes illustrate nuances of identity and the challenges faced by Sikh immigrants, in a way that does not emerge from Prof. Leonard’s approach to her subject.

(p. 74): From an interview with ‘Mrs. Nelson’: “Maybe we feel threatened by seeing these people not becoming Americanized. I don’t think the people already here are going to make any effort to socialize unless they do westernize themselves.”

(p. 77): “Our interviews revealed that almost every Punjabi family had experienced prejudice, but it was newcomers that suffered most.”

(p. 141): “The parents want their children to become proficient in the ways of white America but to maintain a strong anchor within the Punjabi community....The parents see their young as acculturating too rapidly...The students insist that acculturation is both possible and desirable. The two generations agree, however, that Punjabis should not be pressured into changing, that if a girl wishes to wear a *salwaar-kameez* or if a boy wishes to keep his long hair and wear a turban, they should not be teased and made to feel that they must conform to the majority standard. Both generations are disturbed, moreover, by the climate of prejudice that pervades the school experience of all Punjabi young people attending Valleyside High.”

(p. 142): “While no Valleysider students said Punjabis caused difficulties for them personally, many Punjabi youngsters cited the prejudiced attitudes and actions of Valleysiders as their main problem at school. Punjabi parents were troubled by the negative social climate and its impact on their children’s development.”

(p. 143): “Those very few Punjabi boys who wore their hair long and in a turban, in keeping with Sikh teachings and parental wishes complained of being constantly teased.”

(p. 144): “In [one]...case a girl’s long hair was deliberately set on fire...”

(p. 161): “Valleysider students said they believed in religious freedom and the right of every individual not to conform, but in practice they penalized those whose standards were different. Sikh students were even pressured to abandon unshorn hair, turban, and steel bangle

– all outward marks of their Sikh faith and identity... ‘We have numbers on our side,’ explained one Valleyside senior, a bright, popular student and a class officer... To this Valleysider youth, being American meant ‘acting like white people.’”

Prof. Gibson’s work includes much more detail, on a range of challenges faced by the minority Sikh community in her fieldwork site. The main point we wish to make is that the impacts of ignorance and resulting prejudice are faced in their most extreme form by Sikh students who visibly conform to the tenets of their faith. There are parallels between what Prof. Gibson describes from detailed direct observation and what Prof. Leonard has reconstructed from fragmentary historical accounts and interviews. However, Prof. Leonard brushes aside inequalities of power, and the impacts of prejudice and discrimination, and treats responses in these unequal conditions as signs of “cultural flexibility.” This is reflected in her championing of the term “Punjabi” over “Sikh” and her consistent downplaying of the meaning and significance of a distinct and visible Sikh identity to those who wish to maintain it. In our view, Prof. Leonard’s suggestion will not serve the goal of giving Sikh students in California a true sense of their heritage, nor will it convey that heritage to their peers in a manner that diminishes prejudice and adverse behavior toward Sikh students.

We make these points while freely recognizing that the Sikh community is not monolithic (but this is true for every sizeable group). There are a range of religious practices and a range of degrees of conformity to various aspects of what can be termed “orthodoxy.” The Jewish tradition also illustrates this kind of diversity and complexity, in America as well as in Israel. But choices, especially by young people, should be made in an atmosphere of knowledge and mutual respect and understanding. The California schools curriculum is meant to respect this viewpoint, and we therefore submit that this goal is better served by using the nomenclature “Sikh” as much as possible, rather than “Punjabi.” This will acknowledge the special place of Sikhs in California’s societal mosaic, and give young Sikhs a better experience during their formative years in the school system.

Sincerely,



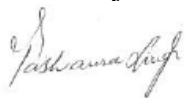
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